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FM AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 3807
INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE
RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 5928
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 3630
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 3489
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 4170
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 1270
RHMCSUU/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 4122
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC

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SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

STATE FOR SCA/CEN

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [KIRF](#) [TX](#)

SUBJECT: "SWINE FLU" KEEPS TURKMEN FROM HAJJ TRIP

11. (U) Sensitive but Unclassified. Not for Internet distribution

12. (SBU) SUMMARY: On November 7, the Turkmen government issued an order prescribing the Committee on Religious Affairs to make the necessary arrangements for a pilgrimage to holy sites around Turkmenistan for all citizens who wish to take the trip. The government used to organize and sponsor Hajj trips to Saudi Arabia for 188 citizens every year. However, this year the Turkmen Government changed plans and diverted hundreds of pilgrims to local Muslim shrines and cemeteries for worship due to a fear that there could be an A/H1N1 flu outbreak among the pilgrims at the Hajj. Interestingly, this decision came after the Turkmen refused to admit that swine flu exists in Turkmenistan. END SUMMARY.

13. (SBU) The Turkmen government first organized Hajj trips to Mecca for government-financed pilgrims in the early 90-s and since then has paid for a planeload (188 persons) to travel annually to Mecca. On November 7, the Turkmen government issued an order prescribing the Committee on Religious Affairs to make the necessary arrangements for a pilgrimage to holy sites around Turkmenistan for all citizens who wished to take the trip. This was first time Hajj trips were substituted with visits to shrines in Turkmenistan. The government publicized its move in local mass media, reporting on each step of the local pilgrims' travel to various sites of religious significance. An Uzbek website "Vesti.UZ," quoting Turkmenistan's Council on Religious Affairs, reported that "due to this year's restriction of entry of pilgrims to Saudi Arabia because of the spread of A/H1N1 flu virus, a delegation of Turkmenistan (to Mecca) will not be organized."

14. (SBU) According to a seamstress from Ashgabat who used to make white dresses prescribed for the Hajj for women preparing to go to Mecca, she did not receive any orders for making the robes this year. The authorities did not allot special charter flights to carry Hajjis to Mecca even for those able to pay for themselves. Therefore, it appears that there may be a reduced number of self-financing pilgrims travelling. We have heard that some self-financing pilgrims have gone, but the number appears to be down from last year.

15. (SBU) COMMENT: The Government's decision not to sponsor the Hajj pilgrimage trip for its citizens or allot a charter flight to Saudi Arabia for those citizens who are willing to pay for the trip

themselves this year may be based on concerns over A/H1N1 flu. However, the government has not prevented Turkmen to travel to places with high rates of A/H1N1 infection, like Ukraine. It is difficult to understand the authorities' decision especially when they refuse to admit that A/H1N1 exists domestically. One wonders, since the Saudis are monitoring for infected people when they arrive, if the government is not concerned that a sick Turkmen might alight in Saudi Arabia, causing embarrassment that there really is A/H1N1 in Turkmenistan, despite government pronouncements. END COMMENT.

CURRAN